

A third way? Why Poland needs an alternative to right-wing populism and western liberalism



The Polish government has endured a tense relationship with the EU's institutions since coming to power in 2015, yet the ruling Law and Justice party still maintains a comfortable lead in recent opinion polls. [Kasia Narkowicz](#) argues that deficiencies in both the government and the opposition mean there is a need to foster a third space in Poland: one that draws from postcolonial sensibilities and is critical both of right-wing populism and western imperialism in the context of Central and Eastern Europe.



Warsaw skyline, Credit: [Giuseppe Milo](#) (CC BY 2.0)

The conservative Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) has frequently been accused of dismantling Polish democracy since it came to power in 2015, undermining its own citizens and refusing to comply with European [quotas](#) on refugees. European observers have been left shaking their heads in disappointment; Poland was supposed to be the shining example of a successful transition from Communism, and was finally '[catching up](#)' with the rest of Europe. Suddenly, it appears to these observers that Poland has made a U-turn and is going backwards.

The conflict currently at the heart of Polish society is one between the conservative, Eurosceptic, illiberal right-wing government, and its West-oriented, pro-EU, liberal-left [opposition](#). The right focuses on restoring Christian values and a 'lost' sense of Polish national identity, including a patriarchal 'war on gender' and a notably less tolerant approach to ethnic and religious minorities.

The government justifies these actions by framing their politics as part of an [anti-colonial agenda](#), one of standing up against centuries-long oppression; by the Germans, then the Communists and more recently by the EU. Brussels is accused of trying to push '[Muslim invaders](#)' disguised as refugees through Polish borders and of sponsoring the so called 'abortion lobby' in Poland, which is compared to Western civilising missions aimed at '[correcting](#)' [indigenous health](#) in the colonial era. Some on the right regard this process as a form of colonialism and [appropriates postcoloniality](#) to justify its nationalistic populism.

In response, the liberal-left opposition has [taken to the streets](#), since it has effectively been [excluded from established communication channels](#) between citizens and the State. The resistance is rooted in the local frustrations of many Poles with their government's actions and not explicitly orchestrated from the West, although this explanation has been put forward by some of the government's supporters. However, the opposition certainly frames its movement as tallying with a wider European identity.

For these Western-gazing liberals, the West and specifically the European Union serve as the ultimate arbiters in the Polish conflict. The Committee for the Defence of Democracy ([KOD](#)), a movement that sprang up as a response to the 2015 elections, is one such example. With a combined Polish and European flag serving as the background photo for their [Facebook page](#), the KOD emphasises their strong 'attachment to European values' and claims the government is '[embarrassing Poland](#)'.

While eagerly awaiting verdicts from Europe to discipline their government, the liberals formulate their resistance to Law and Justice by emphasising their faithfulness to the so called European values of individual liberty, human rights and democracy. The power of these values has been weakened in recent years by developments such as increased securitisation in the context of the war on terror and the resulting erosion of civil liberties. Furthermore, a resistance firmly rooted in appeals to Western identity risks alienating those who are easily charmed by right-wing populism, which is defined in opposition to the perception of such an identity.

If the opposition is to more persuasively challenge the misguided postcolonial narrative of the ruling party, it is necessary to show that their resistance is not dependent on the verdicts of the EU, but rather on the sentiments of Polish citizens. Although Poland's 'postcolonial position' is subject to [scholarly debate](#), the application of [postcolonial and post-dependence](#) thinking to Central and Eastern Europe is undoubtedly a [useful tool](#) that can provide a more nuanced understanding of the region and its relationship to the West – beyond the tired dichotomies of [civilisational](#) politics.

There is therefore a need to foster a third space in Poland; one that draws from postcolonial sensibilities and is critical both of right-wing populism and of Western imperialism and its [relationship to Central and Eastern Europe](#). Such a sensibility, which resists Western imperialism while also resisting right-wing populism, might draw in those that have until now found themselves forced to choose between the two, highly dichotomous, options in the Polish conflict. The time is ripe to rely less, not more, on Western actors that present themselves as being the most civilised option for resistance.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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